



Introduction

The history of every life is made up both of the life we lead, and the richer, more ambitious one we dream of leading, but never quite do... because we are stretched out in the bath or on the sofa, too tired or worried, too distracted or despairing.

This alternative life could be ours if only we were able to get to our desks on time, rise early enough, ask people for what we need, remember how finite existence is – or if we went to see a psychotherapist. We squander some of our best possibilities to the quiet, unheralded tragedy of *procrastination*.

Our shame at the scale of our procrastination is part of the problem. We're already so guilty about what we're not doing that the very thought of examining our errors and taking action feels unbearable. It seems as if we have procrastinated far too much to deserve a new start.

We should be less hard on ourselves – and in the process, less fatalistic about the chances of change. Procrastination is a design flaw of the human animal, not an appalling and unique personal failing. We need to consider the problem rationally, talk about it openly and learn to take small, manageable steps to attenuate its worst ills.

The goal is not to remove procrastination altogether, but to understand its roots, appreciate when it may strike and work out its hold on us, so that we can plot a nimble path around it. Having learnt the art of managing our procrastination, we'll still sometimes spend slightly too long on the sofa, but we will have opened up a major new possibility: that of eventually dying with fewer regrets •

Fear & Procrastination

We tend to account for why we procrastinate with a deeply convincing and hugely punitive explanation: we don't get down to tasks because we are lazy. We don't do what we should because we are, in essence, self-indulgent, slothful and (underneath it all) surely rather bad people.

The truth is more complicated, at once psychologically more nuanced and more worthy of sympathy. The real reason we are indolent is not so much because we are lazy as because we are scared. What we blithely call being lazy is really a symptom and consequence of anxiety.

Oddly, it tends to be very easy to get down to work on things that don't matter very much. Their lack of importance encourages our lighter, more carefree and more productive sides. We find we're done with them in no time and it doesn't even feel like work; it's closer to play.

Yet the stuff that really counts, that we need to complete because our lives may depend on it, terrifies us into inactivity. We are so scared of failure that we don't dare to make a start. At least, if we leave the task untouched, we won't need to face any risk of humiliating incapacity or incompetence.

This analysis points to how we might increase our productivity. We would be advised not to remind ourselves (or get others to remind us) of how important a task may be: we know this full well already and that is precisely the problem.

What we need to do is to stress its relative unimportance in the grander scheme. So what if, in the end, we don't get the job, or lose the contract, or are thought an idiot by people we care about? It happens, and it's survivable. We mustn't ramp up the pressure; we must strive to turn the task from a horrifying ordeal to the only thing we'll know how to deal with calmly and energetically: a piece of play.

Lessening the imagined consequences of messing up liberates us to devote to a task all the energy and talent we actually possess •

